

Interview done for the Norwegian Sighthound Club magazine, August 2008



Marley and Karin at a Coursing event

Please tell us a little bit about yourself:

Where do you live?

I have been living in Vienna for the last 10 years but I grew up in the countryside (a small village in Lower Austria). My family always had animals; cats and a dog and later on it ended up being a little zoo with tortoises, a guinea pig, fish and finally also a bigger species -- horses.

Professional background

I studied computer science at the Vienna University of Technology and started working in the business during my studies some 10 years ago. I have worked with IBM, at the Faculty of Computer Science of the University of Vienna and for the Austrian Research Centers. Currently I am working for a small software company called Lixto (a spin-off from the Technical University of Vienna). I am mostly interested in web technologies, user interface design, usability, and interaction design.

Involvement in Whippets

I have always been a dog person; I was the one looking after the dog, walking the dog when I was still living at my parents' place, but when I moved to Vienna and started to study and work, there were some years without a dog. After some time I started really yearning to own a dog and was desperately searching for a way to reconcile a full time job with a dog. It took three years for my wish to come true - I had a lot of time to study dog breeds, read dog books and talk to owners. I did not know the Whippet breed, this small and elegant sighthound, before - I found it in a book and later I found lots of information on the internet - it seemed to be a dog that had only merits and then, on top, it had this beautiful appearance and great character. I have had my whippet Marley for three years. He is exactly the dog I was looking for and he is adaptable and uncomplicated enough that I can take him with me to work without any problems.



How did you get the idea for The Whippet Archives?

Having a dog, and especially a sighthound, can change your life completely. You get to know new friends and places, and you start new hobbies like visiting dog shows, race tracks, coursing events, etc. and so it was with Marley and me. I was not particularly interested in pedigrees at the beginning, but digging into long pedigree lists sparked a new fascination in me. I was looking for the possibility to drill down into my dog's pedigree, back to his ancient relatives - if possible, back to the very roots of the breed, more than a hundred years ago. I did find some sources on the internet but most of them either focussed on race or show whippets and had a small data set or did not give much information on a single dog. But what I really wanted was to get as much information as possible about my dog's relatives. I wanted to see pictures, get some idea on what they looked like, get some notes on what character they had, etc. But who else other than the owners or breeders could deliver this information? In this way, the idea of The Whippet Archives was born! That was in August 2006. I knew that I had the technical qualification for programming TWA and set it up in exactly the way I imagined and I was counting on the big community of whippet enthusiasts to fill the website with real data, to bring it to life!

Are there other people that have been or are involved in the development of TWA?

The initial version and the technical implementation were done solely by me, on the weekends, during long winter nights and in my holidays - at that time, it wasn't clear if it would ever go online. By 1 January 2007, I had an alpha version ready which I announced to my Austrian whippet friends, and the testing started! :)

After three more long months of testing and bug fixing, we came to the conclusion that TWA was ready to go online and to go public.

Since then, several people have been and still are involved. First of all, the users themselves, this big community of Whippet-lovers, who understand the concept of community websites and are willing to share and exchange their information.

Then over the last year I took up contact with some very enthusiastic TWA users which were willing to do some data maintenance - in addition to their extensive contributions - and to cast an eye over the entries in TWA. These people together, with some of my 'old' Austrian Whippet friends, form the group of TWA administrators and I am very happy to have their support - not only in data cleansing and organisational matters but also in their moral support!

When was it launched, and how has its progress been since then?

TWA was launched and opened to the public in April 2007. It started to get popular in Germany first, but very soon we had entries from almost all European countries. Not long after that, it was discovered by Australians, Russians, Canadians and at the end of 2007 there was a big influx from the United States. The statistics tell me that there are now around 900 visits per day from more than 40 different countries. The total amount of dogs entered so far is around 53,000 and there are more than 1500 registered users.

Has TWA evolved the way you expected it to?

Actually I never had any special expectations; TWA was an attempt. I was investing my time in programming this website and database in a way that it would fulfil the requirements of dog lovers and pedigree researchers building on the then very popular idea of collaborative authoring and community websites. I knew that the community of Whippet-lovers was a very special one, but I would never have expected that TWA would evolve that fast and attract so many Whippet owners and breeders worldwide.

Can you tell us a little bit about the feedback you have gotten on TWA from users and other Whippet enthusiasts around the world?

There was quite a lot of feedback - most of it very positive and encouraging. I also received many valuable suggestions for improvements and some offers to help maintain the data. Some people have told me that they had been looking for such a resource for a long time and were happy finally to have all these pedigrees online and accessible to everyone. Others told me that they are using TWA for completing their own private archives and vice versa. And some just passed a short note telling me that they were completely addicted to entering pedigrees on TWA! :)

How does TWA compare to other, similar online resources, like pawpeds.com?

Most of the other online resources for dog pedigrees I found by the time I was starting the TWA project (more than 22 months ago now) were mainly built around a search form and did not offer data browsing, view of the latest entries, or statistics, etc. Moreover most of them were not set up as community websites but rather new entries would have to be sent via email and processed manually. This was not what I wanted for TWA - the idea was that of a community website, where entries were made and maintained by the community - allowing a database to grow fast with a lot of entries coming from different places all over the world, but of course with the drawback of hosting a certain percentage of incorrect data.

Is the technical solution used for any other breeds, or have you had any requests from other breed communities? Are you open for such requests?

Currently it is only used for The Whippet Archives but I had several requests from people wanting to use it for other breeds. At least at the moment it is not as easy as giving away a software-bundle, I would have to rework a lot of the code. Unfortunately my current job situation does not allow me to invest that many more hours into this hobby to retrieve an out-of-the-box software solution. But even then some administrative and maintenance work would still be there for every installed instance of the solution.

Are there any plans for further development of the tool? Inbreeding coefficient calculations etc?

As already mentioned, I have not much spare time left for technical improvements and features in addition to the daily maintenance work and e-mail support. I would like to prepare some more and better statistics on the data collected so far in TWA and the inbreeding coefficient has been another open issue for a very long time where I would appreciate any help from programmers or other technical skilled people out there. Additional sponsorship would make it easier as we would be able to engage students for some of this work.

Is there anything else you think the readers of the Norwegian Sighthound Club magazine should know about you or TWA?

Just that I am very happy to have chosen a sighthound to be my dog companion as this allowed me to get into contact with and be part of a very special community. Concerning TWA, I would like to point out that the archives are not intended as competition to any existing online or offline Whippet pedigree collection - I am absolutely convinced that the coexistence of and exchange between all these resources is possible and will improve the quality of the data collected in all of them, which will in the end help the breed and its future developments. Finally, if you don't know TWA yet, check it out at "thewhippetarchives.net" and have fun using it! :)